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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the study of public address has meant the study of great speakers, focusing on individual speech texts, or the speaking careers of individual orators. So dominant was this traditional study of public address that, in its halcyon decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, it all but eliminated other approaches to rhetorical criticism. By the early 1960s the study of public address was under sustained attack and was eventually discredited. However, it can be argued that it did not die in the 1960s and 1970s, though it underwent a dramatic metamorphosis--especially in its increasing attention to contemporary rhetorical events, in its growing concern with such collective rhetorical phenomena as social movements and political campaign, and in its shift from neo-Aristotelianism to critical public address. This is not to say that studies in public address can afford to overlook context, but too often considerations of context take precedence over analysis of the text. Context is only one step toward full understanding and explication of a given rhetorical transaction. At the center of that transaction is the text itself. Indeed, one of the greatest benefits of research in public address should be that it leads one to confront rhetorical text--rather than theories of criticism or theories of discourse--as the central object of study. (HOD)

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Textual Studies in Public Address

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If we are to discuss the future of scholarship in public address, we should begin by exploring what we mean by "public address" as an area of rhetorical inquiry.

Traditionally, of course, the study of public address meant the study of great speakers and speeches. Scholars in public address usually focused on individual speech texts or the speaking careers of individual orators, and they typically employed what was known as the historical-critical method. Over the years they produced some distinguished works, including Herbert Wichelns' classic essay on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carroll Arnold's explication of Lord Thomas Erskine as a forensic pleader, Donald Bryant's many studies of Edmund Burke, Loren Reid's biography of Charles James Fox, J. Jeffrey Auer's Antislavery and Disunion, and the pioneering, three-volume History and Criticism of American Public Address. So dominant was the traditional study of public address that, in its halcyon decades of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's, it all but eliminated other approaches to rhetorical criticism. To be a rhetorical critic in those days usually meant that one was also a student of British or American public address.

As we all know, however, not everyone liked the traditional paradigm, and not all studies conforming to it were distinguished. By the early 1960's it was under sustained attack, and it was dealt a lethal stroke in 1965 by Edwin Black's enormously influential Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method. Black's devastating assault on neo-Aristotelianism was at once an indictment of the prevailing method of rhetorical criticism and of the traditional paradigm of scholarship in public address. But, we should note, it was not an indictment of public address per se as an area of scholarship. As its subtitle announced, Black's book was a study in method. It sought to "stimulate and expand the

dialogue on rhetorical criticism," to promote "variety in the methods of rhetoric," and to multiply "the options available to the critic." Although Black questioned neo-Aristotelianism's "too tidy distinction between spoken and written discourse," assailed its "restricted view of context," and decried its emphasis on immediate effect as the controlling basis for critical judgment, he did not call for the elimination--or even a diminution--of studies dealing with rhetorical discourses of historical consequence.[1] Indeed, almost all of the case studies Black developed to illustrate his alternative approach to criticism--John Jay Chapman's speech of August 14, 1911, the Newman-Kingsley dispute of 1864, the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and Lincoln's Second Inaugural--were drawn from the standard materials of Anglo-American public address.

Yet, as often happens, the tide of scholarly revisionism swept everything out to sea. Neo-Aristotelianism as a method of criticism and public address as an area of scholarship were so closely allied that as students of rhetoric followed Black in rejecting the former, they also tended to reject the latter. As neo-Aristotelianism became discredited, so too did the study of public address. Indeed, the very term "public address" fell into disrepute and rhetorical scholars all but fell over one another in rushing to announce that they were "rhetorical critics" rather than, heaven forbid, students of "public address." In many schools, courses in British and American "public address" disappeared from the curriculum, to be replaced by courses in social movements, protest rhetoric, political communication, rhetorical genres, campaign rhetoric, presidential rhetoric, rhetoric and social values, the rhetoric of the New Left, the rhetoric of the far right, the rhetoric of controversy, the rhetoric of war, the rhetoric of social control, etc. Similarly, essays on such topics came to dominate the pages of our national and regional journals.

And so we came to remark the infirmity--some would say the death--of public address as a subject of rhetorical inquiry. Moreover, as is often the case when serious illness or death strikes, there have been doctors to diagnose the diseases afflicting public address, coroners to conduct autoposies upon it, and friends of the family to compose obituaries in its memory.

But did the study of public address really die? If we conceive of that study according to the traditional paradigm, the answer is probably yes. But what if we conceive of the matter differently? What if we move beyond the traditional paradigm? What if we think of "public address" not just as the study of historical speakers and speeches conducted according to the canons of neo-Aristotelianism, but as study of the full range of public, discursive rhetorical acts--historical and contemporary, oral and written, considered individually or as part of a broader campaign or movement? Moreover, what if we disassociate "public address" from its debilitating identification with neo-Aristotelianism and acknowledge that studies in public address employ a wide variety of critical methods, approaches, and perspectives?

Once we take these steps, it can be argued that the study of public address did not die in the 1960's and 1970's, though it certainly underwent a dramatic metamorphosis--especially in its increasing attention to contemporary rhetorical events, in its growing concern with such collective rhetorical phenomena as social movements and political campaigns, and in its shift from neo-Aristotelianism to critical pluralism. Why should we not include as studies in public address such works as Karlyn Campbell's Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric, Edwin Black's "The Second Persona," Leland Griffin's "The Rhetorical Structure of the New Left Movement," Richard Gregg's "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest," Roderick Hart's "The Rhetoric of the True Believer," Robert Scott and Wayne Brockriede's The Rhetoric of Black Power, Robert Newman's

"Under the Veneer: Nixon's Vietnam Speech of November 3, 1969," Bruce Gronbeck's "The Rhetoric of Social-Institutional Change: Black Action at Michigan," Hermann Stelzner's "'War Message' December 8, 1941: An Approach to Language," and Lawrence Rosenfield's "A Case Study in Speech Criticism: The Nixon-Truman Analog"? These are all important and innovative studies that look very different from studies adhering to the traditional paradigm, but I would submit that they are, nevertheless, studies in public address.

To be sure, one can object that such works are "critical" rather than "historical," but as I have argued elsewhere, such a distinction is overdrawn and misleading.[2] Besides, even if one grants that there is a fundamental difference between critical and historical approaches to rhetorical analysis, on what basis should we exclude either from the ken of "public address"? To my mind, Lloyd Bitzer's book on the Carter-Ford debates of 1976 is just as much a study in public address as is Eugene White's book on Puritan rhetoric of the 1740's; Kathleen Jamieson's Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising is as much a study in public address as is Barnet Baskerville's The People's Voice: The Orator in American Society; Mike Hogan's book on the Panama Canal debates of 1977 is as much a study in public address as is my own book on the rhetoric of the American Revolution; David Zarefsky's Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History is as much a study in public address as are his essays on the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

In short, let us free "public address" from the shackles of its past. Let us leave behind forever the parochial conception of public address that dominated the traditional paradigm and that continues to influence the way many of our colleagues conceive of "public address." Let us recognize once and for all that studies in public address can focus on historical or contemporary rhetorical phenomena, can range from mere chronicle to the most audacious

interpretation and assessment, can--indeed, should--adopt whatever critical posture works best to explicate the object of inquiry.

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Let me turn now to the role of textual analysis in the study of public address. While not all such study is centrally preoccupied with textual analysis, it seems to me that a concern for texts--their composition, their generic features, their internal workings, their cultural meaning, their consequences, etc.--is at the heart of most scholarship in public address. This is true whether the "text" in question is Pericles' funeral oration, John Locke's Second Treatise of Government, the Declaration of Independence, an editorial from the New York Times, a sermon by Jerry Falwell, the Kennedy-Nixon debates, the whole corpus of speeches and writings from the women's liberation movement, the television commercials broadcast in behalf of a political candidate, the cartoons of Thomas Nast, an avowedly rhetorical play such as Arthur Miller's The Crucible, an exposé of governmental corruption on 60 Minutes, or Leni Riefenstahl's classic propaganda film Triumph of the Will.

This is not to say that studies in public address can afford to overlook context. As Black has noted, "the work of rhetoric is fragmentary outside its environment; it functions only in a particular world. By contrast, the work of fine art is more self-sufficient and detached from any specific ambiance. This fact gives the discovery of context an enhanced importance in rhetorical criticism as opposed to criticism of the fine arts."[3] The importance of context becomes even more apparent when we recognize that rhetorical discourses function not only within a particular social, political, religious, economic, and cultural world, but also within a special rhetorical world with its own vocabulary, conventions, preconceptions, idioms, and the like. To understand what a rhetorical document means or to ascertain how it functions, one must

recapture "the full wealth of association, implication, and resonance, the many levels of meaning," which a language contains in a given society at a given time.[4] In short, context includes a linguistic dimension that is just as vital as institutional forces and intellectual developments. Seen in this way, even a "purely" textual analysis--one that purports to examine the internal operations of rhetorical discourse without attention to extrinsic factors--can scarcely escape some consideration of context.

In studies of public address, however, considerations of context too often take precedence over analysis of the text. This is particularly true of studies that follow the traditional paradigm. As an example, we might take Marie Hochmuth Nichols' well-known essay on Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address. Of the essay's fifty-one pages, only fifteen deal directly with the text of Lincoln's speech. The remaining thirty-six pages are given over to reprinting the speech and to recounting such matters as the growth of sectional conflict during the previous forty years, the secession of the deep South after Lincoln's election, the state of public opinion on the eve of Lincoln's inauguration, the weather on March 4, 1861, the physical setting of the inaugural ceremonies, Lincoln's appearance and contemporary reputation, the preparation of his inaugural address, his manner of delivery during the speech, the behavior of his immediate audience, and the response of politicians, editorialists, and citizens throughout the land. There can be no quarrel with the way Nichols treats these matters. Her account is scrupulously accurate and gracefully written. Unfortunately, it is divorced from and, surprisingly, largely irrelevant to her comments about the text of Lincoln's speech. A close reading of the essay reveals that its two sections--the lengthy description of context and the brief analysis of text--could almost stand as independent essays.[5]

As important as the discovery of context is to studies in public address, it is not an end in itself. Correctly understood, it is only one step toward

full understanding and explication of a given rhetorical transaction (or set of transactions). At the center of that transaction and, I would argue, properly at the center of the critic's concern, is the text itself. Indeed, one of the greatest benefits of research in public address should be that it leads one to confront rhetorical texts--rather than theories of criticism or theories of discourse--as the central object of study.

But perhaps I am preaching among the converted. After all, textual analysis has become increasingly fashionable among rhetorical scholars of late--partly because of the influence of structuralism, deconstructionism, and reader-response criticism, partly because it is one way to identify "the peculiar angle of vision of the rhetorical critic" in contrast to that of the historian, biographer, or sociologist.[6] This last point has been stated clearly by Michael Leff, who argues that students of rhetoric must go beyond setting a speech in context and explaining what it says to "account for what the speech does, . . . to appreciate the way it articulates and structures what is said as the discourse unfolds." Whereas other scholars may rest content with summarizing the doctrines of a speech or offering a few passing comments on its structure, style and delivery, rhetorical critics should probe its "artistic coherence" by attending to "the action within the text--to the way elements condition one another within the life cycle of the performance."[7]

But how does one get at the action within the text? Certainly not by adhering to any single method of criticism, whether it be neo-Aristotelianism, pseudo-Burkeianism, fantasy theme analysis, or whatever. Nor is it enough simply to proceed through a text from beginning to end, charting its major moves and strategies. The main ideal of criticism is, in Kenneth Burke's words, "to use all that is there to use."[8] The kind of textual analysis I am attempting to describe requires full and penetrating comprehension of those contextual

forces--institutional, intellectual, and linguistic--that significantly condition the text. It also requires a sensitive and discerning reading of the text in light of--indeed, as inextricably bound up with--those contextual forces. Beyond the fact that it will foreground the text, the final shape of this kind of study is unpredictable. It will depend on the interests and abilities of the individual critic and on what the critic discovers in the course of his or her investigation. It might look like Leff's analysis of Lincoln's "House Divided" speech; it might look like Stelzner's study of FDR's war message; it might look like Burke's "Antony in Behalf of the Play."

Finally, while on the subject of textual analysis, let me enter a plea for studies dealing with major texts in the history of American oratory. It has long been a source of amazement to me that students of rhetoric have not produced a body of rich critical literature providing authoritative textual studies of such acknowledged masterpieces as Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," John Hancock's Boston massacre oration, Fisher Ames' speech on the Jay Treaty, Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural address, Daniel Webster's first Bunker Hill oration, Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar," Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, Henry Grady's "The New South," William Jennings Bryan's "The Cross of Gold," Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address, Douglas MacArthur's "Farewell to the Cadets," and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream."

These are unsurpassed exemplars of the rhetorician's art that deserve to be studied and appreciated in the same way students of literature study and appreciate Hamlet as the highest expression of Elizabethan drama or Crime and Punishment as the preeminent psychological novel.[9] Moreover, they are historical and cultural documents of the first order. Central to our country's mythic heritage and historical experience, they merit interrogation as

quintessentially American documents on the same order as The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, or The Great Gatsby. Just as our colleagues in English have a powerful corpus of scholarship illuminating the literary artistry of great poems, novels, and short stories we need no less powerful a corpus of scholarship explicating the rhetorical artistry of classic speeches and orations.

Of course, this is not all we should be doing. But neither is it something we should fail to do. Not only will it help fill an enormous gap in our own literature, it will help make clear the importance of our work to the academy at large. At a time when scholars in a variety of disciplines have rediscovered the importance of rhetoric in general and of the American oratorical tradition in particular, we should not leave to others the task of elucidating the central texts of that tradition. To my mind, such elucidation is, just now, the most urgent priority facing students of public address.

NOTES

[1]Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. viii, 11, 39.

[2]Stephen E. Lucas, "The Schism in Rhetorical Scholarship," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 67 (February 1981), 1-20.

[3]Black, Rhetorical Criticism, p. 39.

[4]J.G.A. Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 12.

[5]In American Speeches, ed., Wayland Maxfield Parrish and Marie Hochmuth (New York: Longman's, Green and Co., 1954), pp. 21-71.

[6]Michael C. Leff, Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University School of Speech, 1984), p. 6.

[7]Ibid., p. 7.

[8]Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1957), p. 21.

[9]Cf. Ernest G. Bormann, The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 60.